

PSEUDO-PLUTARCH'S *DE MUSICA*: THE MORAL AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPORTANCE OF MUSIC AND NEOPLATONISM'S CRITICAL ATTITUDE AGAINST ITS PROGRESS

Abstract: The ethics of music have been an issue of intense discussion throughout classical antiquity, as manifested by Damon's early research on the moral influence of music (5th cent. B.C.). However, Plato significantly contributed to the subject in his Republic, as he imposed strict and severe regulations about music and specific harmonies that were considered good for morals and pedagogy. Furthermore, Aristotle, in his Politics, studied the ethics of music, with a different attitude towards the aulos, the main musical instrument of his era, from his predecessor.

Pseudo-Plutarch's De Musica was written within the Neoplatonic movement. The dialogue, in which the banqueters discuss the origins and evolution of music is heavily influenced by the Platonic ones. There is substantial praise, from both Lysias (a practicing musician) and Soterichos (a theoretician and early critic of music), for the era when music was harmonic, simple and not connected to theatre. Early Ancient Greek musicians and lyric poets had a rather conservative approach to music, often subtracting notes from musical scales. However, as music progressed and got correlated with the theatrical action, more complex scales and harmonies, such as the Lydian and Phrygian ones, were mostly used; the banqueters did not have a high opinion of those, due to the passive morals they were associated with. As a result, the contemporary musical scales were considered harmful for the morals that were to be instilled in people, especially children.

In summary, this late-antiquity dialogue, of which the real author is yet to be convincingly identified, can be considered a very good example of the Ancient Greek attitude about progress, especially in the changing, uncertain times of the early centuries CE.

The Ethics of Music from Damon to Aristotle

Ethics and music have always been a source of heated debate for the Ancient Greeks. In the 5th c. BCE, Damon of Athens wrote a treatise about the ethics of music. Sadly, it has not survived. Since it is considered to have been a very important text on the subject, there is nothing I would not do to unearth it! Until that blessed opportunity comes, though, we can give solace through the 14th book of Athenaeus' *Deipnosophists*, which preserves an excerpt from Heraclides of Pontos' treatise on music, in which he characterizes the musical harmonies according to their origin (Ionian, Aeolian, etc).

Athen. *Deip.* 14.264c

Ἡρακλείδης δ' ὁ Ποντικός ἐν τρίτῳ περὶ Μουσικῆς οὐδ' ἀρμονίαν φησὶ δεῖν καλεῖσθαι τὴν Φρύγιον καθάπερ οὐδὲ τὴν Λύδιον. ἀρμονίας γὰρ εἶναι τρεῖς· τρία γὰρ καὶ γενέσθαι Ἑλλήνων γένη, Δωριεῖς, Αἰολεῖς, Ἴωνας.

Translation (by Charles Burton Gulick):

But Heraclides of Pontos in Book III on Music claims that it should not be referred to as Phrygian any more as Lydian; for there are three scales, inasmuch as there are three types of Greeks: Dorians, Aeolians, Ionians.

However, it seems that he mistakenly characterizes each harmony according to the morals of the people from whom it is considered to originate. He even goes as far as saying that the Phrygian and Lydian should not be considered as *harmonies*, because they were not associated with the three Greek tribes (e.g. the Aeolian harmony was considered to be haughty by Heraclides, since Aeolians were thought to be so).

Athen., *ibid*, 14. 264d (continued)

Τὸ δὲ τῶν Αἰολέων ἦθος ἔχει τὸ γαῦρον

Translation (Gulick):

The Aeolic character is haughty

Despite this weakness, Heraclides' treatise, which has not survived, deserves more than a mere mention due to its influence on pseudo-Plutarch. Furthermore, Damon's impact is strong on Plato and pseudo-Plutarch, which means that there are some references to his treatise.

Before moving on to Neoplatonism, though, we should first refer to Plato's theory. Plato always considered music as the basis of a youth's education. Thus, attention should be paid to the quality of harmonies that would be taught, because those would reflect the laws and values of the Republic.

Plato, *Rep.* 398e

Τίνες οὖν θρηνώδεις ἁρμονίαι; Λέγε μοι: σὺ γὰρ μουσικός. Μυξολιδιστί, ἔφη, καὶ συντονολυδιστί καὶ τοιαῦταί τινες. Οὐκοῦν αὗται, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, ἀφαιρετέαι; ἄχρηστοι γὰρ καὶ γυναιξιν ἅς δεῖ ἐπιεικεῖς εἶναι, μὴ ὅτι ἀνδράσι.

Translation (by Paul Shorey):

What, then, are the dirge-like modes of music? Tell me, for you are a musician. "The mixed Lydian", he said, "and the tense or higher Lydian, and similar modes". "These, then," said I, "we must do away with. For they are useless even to women who are to make the best of themselves, let alone to men".

Complex harmonies, such as the Lydian, were considered inappropriate for the education of the guardians and the flute was frowned upon, because of its use in tragedies. Harmonies, such as the Dorian, were commended for their morals, as Plato's main influence, Pythagoras, had already suggested.¹

¹ Gorman (1979): 154.

Plato, *ibid.* 399a

Ταύταις οὖν, ὦ φίλε, ἐπὶ πολεμικῶν ἀνδρῶν ἐσθ' ὅτι χρῆσι;

Οὐδαμῶς, ἔφη: ἀλλὰ κινδυνεύει σοι δωριστὶ λείπεσθαι καὶ φρυγιστί.

Translation (Shorey):

“Will you make any use of them for warriors?” “None at all”, he said; “but it would seem that you have left the Dorian and the Phrygian”.

However, Aristotle, in the 8th book of his *Politics*, criticized Plato for accepting the Phrygian harmony, which contradicts his rejection of the flute. The contradiction is even more obvious, because, as it was noticed, it was left along with the Dorian as the most appropriate harmonies.

Aristot. *Pol.*, 8. 1342a31-33

ὁ δ' ἐν τῇ Πολιτείᾳ Σωκράτης οὐ καλῶς τὴν φρυγιστὶ μόνην καταλείπει μετὰ τῆς δωριστὶ, καὶ ταῦτα ἀποδοκιμάσας τῶν ὀργάνων τὸν αὐλόν.

Translation (by Ernest Barker):

“Socrates” in the *Republic* makes the error of selecting the Phrygian mode as the only one to be kept along with the Dorian; and his error is the more striking, as previously, in dealing with instruments, he rejected the use of the flute.

Aristotle considered the teaching of the flute very difficult, because one had to be already a professional musician in order to learn it. Furthermore, he disapproved of professionalism and musical competitions; he thought they vulgarized music. Practice of the flute was a suitable pastime for slaves, but not for freemen; as a result, the flute is totally rejected as an educational tool.

Aristot. *ibid.*, 8. 1341a18-20

Οὔτε γὰρ αὐλοὺς εἰς παιδείαν ἀκτέον οὔτ' ἄλλο τι τεχνικὸν ὄργανον, οἷον κιθάραν κἄν εἴ τι τοιοῦτον ἕτερον ἔστιν, ἀλλ' ὅσα ποιήσῃ αὐτῶν ἀκροατὰς ἀγαθοὺς ἢ τῆς μουσικῆς παιδείας ἢ τῆς ἄλλης

Translation (by Ernest Barker)

Flutes should not be used in musical education; and we ought to avoid any other instrument which requires professional skill, such as the harp and all other such instruments.

However, there is common ground between Plato and Aristotle: musical education has to be carefully organized and strictly regulated.

The Debate about *De Musica's* Author and Era

Pseudo-Plutarch's *De Musica* turns out to be enlightening, since not only does it discuss the morals of music at length, but it also describes the history of music in detail. Despite the weaknesses of this dialogue, such as the untidiness of the material,² the work is very important and, in my opinion, underestimated. The dialogue was attributed to Plutarch and associated with his *Moralia*, but there are many clues, such as the Neoplatonic and didactic elements that indicate the text is not his. Archbishop Siamakis offers evidence that the dialogue was written by Plutarch of Athens around 4th-5th cent. CE.³ Lasserre argues that the author probably is Dionysius of Halicarnassus,⁴ and Gibson (2005), in her treatise about Aristoxenus, insists on the book being written in the 1st-2nd cent. CE. It is difficult to find out precisely who wrote it and when. However, there is no doubt that the Platonic influences are palpable.

The dialogue takes place in Onesicrates' house. This very fact confounds the issue about the real author, since Plutarch mentioned in the 8th book of his *Moralia* that Onesicrates the doctor organized a banquet attended by special guests. It is

² Winnington-Ingram (1928) mentions that the dialogue is misjudged, while Neubecker (1990) has no doubts about this work's value, despite it being mostly reduced to quoting other authors. Weil and Reinach (1900), in the introduction of their French translation of *De Musica*, explain in detail the weaknesses of the dialogue.

³ Siamakis (2005): 10-14 explains in detail the arguments that lead him to believe the dialogue should be attributed to Plutarch of Athens. He estimates that the dialogue was written between 180-400 CE, probably in the years between 390-410 CE, a period of intense teaching activity for Plutarch of Athens. There are other works of Plutarch of Athens mentioned, which contribute to the enhancement of his findings.

⁴ Lasserre (1954): 104 If Dionysius of Halicarnassus were the author, then the dialogue will have been written between 170-300 CE and no later than the second half of the 2nd cent. CE.

possible that the author uses Onesicrates' name in order to create some kind of continuity. The author mentions that he was a guest in the banquet, but this may simply be a literary invention.

After setting the scene, the characters through which the reader will travel in time and explore the history of music appear. These are Lysias, a practicing musician, and Soterichos, an early theoretician and critic of music. The interesting aspect of this dialogue is that there is no disagreement between them; instead, they offer different perspectives, according to each other's profession, which serve in drawing the complete picture of the evolution of music.

De Musica's Sources, Influences and Contribution to the Discussion of Ethics and Music

Lysias starts off by researching the origins of music. He mostly uses the knowledge derived from other authors, such as the aforementioned Heraclides of Pontos, who mentions Amphion as the introducer of citharodic poesis. Amphion was taught by his father, Zeus, and an epigraph of Sicyon testifies to it. Among the ancient musicians (*aoidoi*), we hear the names of Phemius, Demodocus and Thamyris. Terpandrus introduced the citharodic nomes. The citharodic nomes (νόμοι, which implies that they were created with strict regulations) were drawn in epic metres and dithyrambic style in order not to break the rules.

Ps. Plut., *De Mus.* 1133b

Τὸ δ' ὅλον ἡ μὲν κατὰ Τέρπανδρον κιθαρωδία καὶ μέχρι τῆς Φρύνιδος ἡλικίας παντελῶς **ἀπλή** τις οὔσα διετέλει

Translation (by William W. Goodwin):

Now the music appropriated to the harp, such as it was at the time of Terpander, continued in all its **simplicity**, till Phrynis grew into esteem.

The praise of the simplicity of the Old music is already apparent. Crexus, Timotheus and Philoxenus are noted for their rejection of that simplicity. These names are possibly representatives of the New Dithyramb, which appeared in 5th cent. BCE.⁵

Ps. Plut., *ibid*, 1135 c-d

Κρέξος δὲ καὶ Τιμόθεος καὶ Φιλόξενος καὶ οἱ κατ' αὐτοὺς τὴν ἡλικίαν γεγονότες ποιηταὶ φορτικώτεροι καὶ φιλόκαινοι γεγόνασιν, τὸν φιλόανθρωπον καὶ θεματικὸν νῦν ὀνομαζόμενον τρόπον διώξαντες: τὴν γὰρ ὀλιγοχορδίαν καὶ τὴν **ἀπλότητα** καὶ σεμνότητα τῆς μουσικῆς παντελῶς **ἀρχαϊκὴν** εἶναι συμβέβηκεν.

Translation (Goodwin):

But Crexus, Timotheus, and Philoxenus, and those other poets of the same age, growing more arrogant and studious of novelty, affected those other manners now called Philanthropic and Thematic. For now the fewness of strings and the plainness and the majesty of the old music are looked upon as absolutely out of date.

Soterichos' part is almost twice as long as Lysias', which is indicative of the dialogue's aim. Lysias recognizes his expertise and Soterichos is encouraged to participate and speak.

Soterichos makes it clear that music has divine origins. Apollo did not only invent the *kithara*, but also the *aulos*. The statue of Apollo in Delos gives a proof of that, as it shows the god holding a bow in his right hand and in his left the three Graces. The first of them holds a lyre, the second one has flutes, and the third one has a pipe (flute of Pan) at her mouth (apparently the statue has not survived). Since those ancient times, though, things have changed, as music became part of theatrical action and harmonies became more complex. The ones that are mostly used in theatre are the Lydian and the Mixolydian, which Soterichos criticizes as "fit for lamentations" and "fit for tragedies", respectively:

⁵ Neubecker (1990) mentions that Pratinas (if the assertion is his) criticized the progressive trends in music which started in 5th cent. BCE, writing that the flute had become more important than the song itself.

Ps. Plut., *ibid.* 1136bc

Τοιγάρτοι Πλάτων ἐν τῷ τρίτῳ τῆς Πολιτείας δυσχεραίνει τῇ τοιαύτῃ μουσικῇ: τὴν γοῦν Λύδιον ἁρμονίαν παραιτεῖται, ἐπειδὴ ὀξεῖα καὶ ἐπιτήδειος πρὸς θρῆνον ... καὶ ἡ Μιξολύδιος δὲ παθητικὴ τίς ἐστι, τραγωδίαις ἀρμόζουσα.

Translation (Goodwin):

Which Plato rejects in the third book of his commonwealth, refusing the Lydian harmony as ***fit only for lamentations***...the mixed Lydian ***moves the affections, and is fit for tragedies***.

It is important to emphasize that the more complex harmonies existed long before they were used in tragedy or in the New Dithyramb. Thus, the ancient musicians preferred to use the simpler ones, to the point of subtracting notes instead of adding new ones (this makes the spondeion scale),⁶ not because of ignorance of the more complex ones. They would mostly pay attention to the moral implications the scales would have on the listeners: the simpler, the better.

Ps. Plut., *ibid.* 1137ab

Οὐδὲ δι' ἄγνοιαν οἱ περὶ Ὀλυμπον καὶ Τέρπανδρον καὶ οἱ ἀκολουθήσαντες τῇ τούτων προαιρέσει περιεῖλον τὴν πολυχорδίαν τε καὶ ποικιλίαν ... ὀλιγόχορδα γὰρ ὄντα καὶ ἀπλᾶ διαφέρει τῶν ποικίλων καὶ πολυχόρδων

Translation (Goodwin):

Nor was it out of ignorance that Olympus and Terpander and those who came after them would not admit of larger instruments and more variety of strings ... For, being ***plain*** and without more than three strings, they so far excelled those that were more numerously strung.

Soterichos uses Plato as his point of reference, enhancing the Neoplatonic element in the dialogue. Plato conceived the theory of the two middles (μεσότητες) that should exist in order to create harmony between the four natural elements. Musical harmony should correlate with the harmony of the soul. Even Aristotle considered harmony as heavenly, because it had a divine, noble and angelic nature.

⁶ Winnington-Ingram (1928): 84.

However, the progress in music set the concept of harmony aside, and the morals became looser. The new musicians tended to show off their skills by trying to change the νόμοι and were mostly active in the theatre, unlike the old days, when music was at the service of education and the worship of the gods.

Ps. Plut., *ibid.* 1140ef

ἐπὶ μέντοι τῶν καθ' ἡμᾶς χρόνων τοσοῦτον ἐπιδέδωκε τὸ τῆς διαφθορᾶς εἶδος, ὥστε τοῦ μὲν παιδευτικοῦ τρόπου μηδεμίαν μνείαν μηδ' ἀντίληψιν εἶναι, πάντας δὲ τοὺς μουσικῆς ἀπτομένους πρὸς τὴν θεατρικὴν προσκεχωρηκέναι μοῦσαν.

Translation (Goodwin):

But in our age is such another face of new inventions, that there is not the least remembrance or care of that use of music which related to education; for all our musicians make it their business to court the theatre Muses, and study nothing but compositions for the stage.

The comedians, especially Pherecrates and Aristophanes, satirized New Music and its morals, especially Philoxenus, one of its main representatives. In Pherecrates' passage, Music tells Justice about the mistreatment she endured from various musicians, and refers to Philoxenus as the vilest, since he throws her off the ground with his twelve (!) strings:

Ps. Plut., *ibid.*, 1141f-1142a

«Ὁ δὲ Τιμόθεος μ', ὦ φιλότατη, κατορώρυχε καὶ διακέκναικ' αἰσχίστα».

Translation (Goodwin):

But then Timotheus with his freaks

Furrowed my face, and ploughed my cheeks.

In Aristophanes, Music is angry against Philoxenus, because he introduced lyric verses in cyclic choruses and used disharmonious metres:

Ps. Plut., *ibid.*, 1141f-1142a

ἐξαρμονίους ὑπερβολαίους , τ' ἀνοσίους
Καὶ νιγλάρους , ὥσπερ τε τὰς ῥαφάνους ὅλην
Καμπῶν με καταμέστωσε.

Translation (Goodwin):

He filled me with discordant measures airy,
Wicked Hyperbolaei and Niglari;
And to uphold the follies of his play
Like a lank radish bowed me every way.

The correlation of music and morals is evident by a passage in the *Iliad*, where Achilles played the lyre singing about the glories of heroes, in order not to lose his bravery and integrity as he had distanced himself from the battle.

Hom. *Il.* 9. 185-189

Μυρμιδόνων δ' ἐπὶ τε κλισίας καὶ νῆας ἰκέσθην,
Τὸν δ' εὖρον φρένα τερπόμενον φόρμιγγι λιγείῃ
Καλῇ δαιδαλέῃ, ἐπὶ δ' ἀργύρεον ζυγὸν ἦεν,
Τὴν ἄρετ' ἐξ ἐνάρων πόλιν Ἡετίωνος ὄλεσσας:
Τῇ ὃ γε θυμὸν ἔτερπεν, αἶδε δ' ἄρα κλέαν ἀνδρῶν.

Translation (by A. T. Murray):

And they came to the huts and the ships of the Myrmidons,
and found him delighting his soul with a clear-toned lyre,
fair and richly-wrought, whereon was a bridge of silver; this
had he taken from the spoil when he laid waste the city of
Eetion. Therewith was he delighting his soul, and he sang
of the glorious deeds of warriors;

Music used to have healing effects, as evidenced by the examples of Odysseus (*Od.* 19.457), who was cured with chants, the Achaeans who sang a paean in order to calm Apollo down and have him stop the disease that had hit them (*Il.* 1.472-4), and Thales of Crete, who cured an epidemic with the aid of music.

Ps. Plut., *De Mus.* 1146c

Καὶ Θαλήταν τὸν Κρήτα, ὃν φασὶ κατὰ τι πυθόχρηστον

Λακεδαιμονίου παραγενόμενον διὰ μουσικῆς ἰάσασθαι ἀπαλλάξαι τε τοῦ κατασχόντος λοιμοῦ τὴν Σπάρτην

Translation (Goodwin):

And Thaletas of Crete, of whom Pratinas writes that, being sent for by the Lacedaemonians by advice of the oracle, he freed the city from a raging pestilence.

Furthermore, Aristoxenus considered music to be the antidote to the strong wine served in banquets, aiding in the morals remaining intact:⁷

Ps. Plut., *ibid.*, 1146f-1147a

Ἀριστόξενος ἐκεῖνος γὰρ ἔλεγεν εἰσάγεσθαι μουσικὴν, παρ' ὅσον μὲν οἶνος σφάλλιν πέφυκε τῶν ἄδην αὐτῷ χρησαμένων τὰ τε σώματα καὶ τὰς διανοίας: ἡ δὲ μουσικὴ τῇ περὶ αὐτὴν τάξει τε καὶ συμμετρίᾳ εἰς τὴν ἐναντίαν κατάστασιν ἄγει τε καὶ πραῖνει.

Translation (Goodwin):

To which our Aristoxenus agrees, who alleges that music was introduced at banquets for this reason, that as wine intemperately drunk weakens both the body and mind, so music by its harmonious order and symmetry assuages and reduces them to their former constitution.

Music and Morals: an Issue Relevant even in Modern Times

⁷ Plato, in his *Laws* (790e-791a) mentions that the flute of Pan was used to calm down the ecstatic state of Dionysus' followers.

The whole issue of the progress of music and morals regained its heat in the early centuries CE. The ancient world was irreversibly changing, despite the violent attempts of the Roman emperors to persecute Christians as a preventive measure against the flux of history. Especially if the dialogue was written on 4th-5th cen. CE, it would coincide with the era the Roman Empire was rapidly losing momentum in favor of the burgeoning Byzantine one, indicating the transition from antiquity to Christianity. Neoplatonism heavily influenced Christianity, but it was still strongly attached to the ancient world.

It is very likely that the New Music could not have been as harmful as it was considered, since it was associated with tragedy, one of the highest creations of humanity. However, Plato criticized tragedy and its music, because he knew very well the impact it had on the audience's psychology.

The debate about the progress of music and its morals did not settle during late antiquity. In the 1980s, a time of great change, heavy metal music was emerging and setting itself apart from the norm. Especially after Iron Maiden's *Number of the Beast* was released in 1982, the heated discussion about music and its influence on youth reemerged in full force. However, the issue was not dealt with the philosophical approach that the ancients would take, but with moral panic: burning of the albums, conspiracy theories about hidden messages which can be heard by playing the record in reverse, to name but a few. Events came to a head when the PMRC (Parents Music Resource Centre) was formed in 1985, attempting to censor music. It is because of that institution that the "Parental Advisory Explicit Content" stickers started appearing on the albums. Judas Priest were taken to trial because two of their fans committed suicide; they were considered to be "bad influences" for the young, because allegedly they were using subliminal messages. Dee Snider from Twisted Sister defended heavy metal in court and in front of the PMRC. Even this

example proves that the discussion about the relationship between music and morals instilled on the young is not over.

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